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SUBJECT: MUMBAI MASALA JULY 25, 2008: AGITATION IN GUJARAT, RBI TALKS
ABOUT FINANCIAL INCLUSION AND MP HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

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AGITATION AGAINST HINDU SPIRITUAL LEADER IN GUJARAT TURNS VIOLENT

¶2. (U) Led by the non-political civic group Jagega Gujarat Sangharash Samiti (JGSS), fifteen social organisations, called for "Gujarat bandh" (a general strike) on Monday, July 21st, to protest against the July 5th mysterious deaths of two young boys in the school run by Hindu spiritual leader Asaram Bapu who has mass following in Gujarat. The Gujarat unit of the Congress Party supported the bandh to demand transfer of the death investigation to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). Security in Ahmadabad was tight in specific parts of the city, including the homes of the two boys, to help prevent the bandh from turning violent. No clashes between citizens were reported during Monday's bandh. Businesses and schools throughout the state and in most of Ahmadabad carried on as usual, but some shops and schools in the city closed as a precautionary measure.

The state's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government ordered a judicial probe by a retired high court judge, but the parents of the deceased children are still demanding a CBI investigation.

¶3. (U) The deaths have pitted residents of Ahmadabad, Gujarat's commercial capital, into pro-Bapu and anti-Bapu camps. The parents allege that school leadership did not take the disappearance of the boys seriously, nor inform the parents in time. The father of one boy has been fasting in protest to the lack of investigation. On July 17, the anti-Bapu residents burned cars outside of the guru's school and pelted rocks at his followers. In response, on July 18, his supporters attacked the media, damaging equipment and injuring some journalists. According to Ahmedabad police, the disturbances on the 18th were localized, confined to a small section of Ahmedabad. On July

19, journalists demanded an enquiry into the attack on them and Gujarat BJP chief minister Narendra Modi acceded to that request and the situation returned to normal.

RBI Talks About Financial Inclusion Developments

¶4. (U) Sudarshan Sen, Chief General Manager, Department of Banking Supervision (a supervisor to the commercial banks) at RBI told Congenoffs that overseeing financial inclusion activities of banks was a key priority for the central bank. Apart from the public sector banks, institutions like ICICI, Citibank, JP Morgan and Bank of America have been the front runners in the financial inclusion plan, he cited. Such institutions have realized that deposits are not the only product desired by the masses; an array of products like credit/loans, insurance, debit cards, credit cards needs to be provided so as to facilitate their complete participation. He noted that some banks like ICICI are using technological innovations like hand held ATMs for routine transactions like the disbursement of small amounts of cash and account balance inquiries in the rural areas.

¶5. (U) RC Sarangi, the General Manager from the same department, proudly stated that they had achieved their first step in the financial inclusion plan. At least one district from each state is now formally included in the financial

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system. He added that instead of setting up full-fledged branches, many banks preferred to use a banking 'facilitator' or a 'correspondent'. Thus banks could work with non-government organizations (NGOs) and self-help groups to make access to financial products easier.

Madhya Pradesh Human Rights Commission Describes its Efforts

¶6. (U) Whereas India's national human rights commission has been held as a model for other countries, the Human Rights Commission (HRC) for the state of Madhya Pradesh (MP) is held up as a model for other states in India and conducts training to assist other states. On July 18, Congenoffs met with officials from the HRC who reviewed their programs.

¶7. (U) According to Vijay Chandra, deputy secretary of the MP HRC, most of the nearly 15,000 cases filed with the Commission last year were complaints related to illegal detentions and failures of the police to register citizen's complaints of crimes committed. The commission monitors police investigations, especially cases where it is alleged that police have falsified evidence or destroyed key evidence. In addition to investigating the complaints, the Commission conducts training workshops in the MP police training academy to educate the police about their duty to mete out justice fairly and how to interact with women suspects, witnesses or complainants to avoid violating the rights of the women.

¶ 18. (U) The Commission has also undertaken a host of investigations into women's rights, environmental rights, and the right to health care and safe drinking water. One of the Commission's major campaigns has been the effort to combat female feticide. According to Chandra, while nationwide, there were 931 female births per thousand male live births, per the 2001 census, for the whole of MP, the figure stands at 927 female births per 1,000 male births. However, in three MP districts bordering Uttar Pradesh, the female to male sex ratio at birth is as low as 800 to 830 per 1000 male births. The MP HRC is trying to prevent female feticide in these districts by conducting surprise visits on clinics and distribution of awareness raising pamphlets to villagers. The state does not have a vibrant civil society, so the HRC conducts most of these efforts through its own volunteers, known as "Aaayog Mitras" ("Friends of the Commission"). These "Friends of the Commission" are retired jurists, school-heads, or prominent local lawyers or doctors.

¶ 19. (U) Justice D. M. Dharmadhikari, Chair of MP's Human Rights Commission, a retired Supreme Court Justice, and Justice Azad also met with Congenoff on July 18. They explained that MP's HRC utilizes law school volunteers from across the country every summer, each of whom undertakes a specific issue to investigate.

To assist the HRC in its educational campaigns, students are asked to act as observers in police stations to identify why so many people are having difficulties getting their complaints registered. One notable study just being concluded is a comparative study of public health delivery systems and evaluating the best means to bring healthcare to the rural poor.

MP's HRC is also investigating the possible adverse health implications of radiation from cell phone towers in neighborhoods and of artificial coloring and additives in food. The Commission's investigations on the right to education have primarily focused on cases where someone was wrongly denied admission to a university or where the institution sought to exploit the student, demanding extra payments to secure admission.

¶ 110. (U) Vijay Chandra, deputy secretary of the MP HRC said the state has 3-4 districts where the rights of migrant workers and migrants fleeing from the violence in Naxal-held areas of neighboring Chhattisgarh are in jeopardy. The HRC's position is that the government has the responsibility to ensure the safety

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of all of its inhabitants. He said the state has the obligation to find a permanent solution for those without shelter or safety.

¶ 111. (U) The HRC does not rely upon the Right to Information Law as it has direct access to government information. The justices said they have found that the Law is widely misused by disgruntled former employees and by media who want to sensationalize issues.

¶ 112. (U) The Commission operated in Hindi since its inception, the language of MP, but is now also trying to disseminate information about its decisions and activities in English so that their findings can be accessible to non-Hindi speaking regions of India. The MP HRC is also trying to make its website comprehensive and searchable. The Commission wants to acquire reference materials such as law journals and Human Rights treatises from other jurisdictions, such as the US and Europe, to utilize in their own case analyses and for the law students of Bhopal (Bhopal is the home to one of the 12 National Law

Universities established by special charter recently). Chairman Dharmahikari said the Commission is hampered by the high cost of such materials and internet access to those sources. He asked if there was a way to obtain these materials for free or at lower costs. Post's librarians are working to obtain information on resources for the Commission.

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